Fanglao, Generation and Prefiguration: Building community and demonstrating futures through dance in Vientiane, Laos

Roy Huijsmans

Abstract

Fanglao is a Vientiane, Lao PDR, based dance company run by and for young people in and connected to Laos. In this paper I draw on participant observation conducted in a number of Fanglao organized activities in 2019-2020 (dance festival, rehearsals, outreach activities, etc) and one-on-one interviews with key protagonists. Fanglao is one of the exponents of an emerging creative arts scene that has been developing in Laos over the past two decades or so, much in relation to the broader political and economic changes that have taken place in Laos. In this paper I reflect on the importance of Fanglao in contributing to building a creative and social community in the field of modern and urban dance. This is realized through the establishment of their own dance studio (venue), the various activities they host (both online and in person) and the cross-fertilisation with other forms of creative expression (i.e. visual arts) and actors in the broader creative arts scene. Conceptually, I highlight the notion of 'prefiguration', the act of realizing in the present a resemblance of a possible future, and how this matters from a generation perspective in a context in which most (aspiring) dancers are confronted with parental worries that excessive time spent dancing and with Fanglao might jeopardise their futures.

Roy Huijsmans is a social scientist working on issues concerning children and youth in mainland Southeast Asia (mostly Laos) and Europe (mostly Netherlands). His research is ethnographic and has focused on young people in migration, young people and the performing arts, (rural) schooling and aspiration, the interplay between migration and the platform economy, and the future of farming. Together with Kasia Grabska he has edited a Special Issue collection in Music and Arts in Action (2022) on 'Trangressing and reworking social boundaries through dance and music'.

'We faced many struggles, we didn't have a studio to practice, we didn't have a teacher to teach us, we just tried to work out ourselves what is right and wrong, we didn't have sponsors. We started from zero, we only had our seniors like Kaka who always organized the event or contest so we can try and practice with friends after school. This was very important because it made us become more close even though we were from different families and raised in a different way, and we became a small community that loves dancing. That made us decide to continue, as dancing is something that connected us together' (Mimee, 21 January 2020)

Mimee is one of the key persons involved in the Vientiane, Laos, based dance company Fanglao. She has been dancing seriously since around 2013 when she was about 17 years of age. Reflecting on her journey into dance she emphasized the importance of becoming a small community connected through dance. Importantly, this community is a youth-led and youth-organised space. The 'seniors' Mimee refers to are only a few years older than her.

The interview with Mimee took place about a month after the 10th edition of the Fang Mae Khong, an international dance festival hosted by Fanglao in Vientiane, Laos. Seeing the parking ground filled up, the entrance to dance studio lined with large banners carrying beautiful visuals and details of the festival programme, a videographer capturing footage of the event and a local restaurant having set up a foodstall selling snacks and beverages one gets the impression that there is a vibrant contemporary and urban dance scene in Vientiane which also

attracts other artistic and creative contributions and actors, ranging from audio-visual artists to culinary artists.

In this paper, I draw on observations of the various creative activities organized by and at Fanglao complemented with individual interviews with key actors. The observations took place in 2019-2020. The interviews were conducted in early 2020 by a Lao research assistant whom herself has been taking dance classes too at Fanglao.Additionally, the author first interviewed key protagonist behind Fanglao in 2015 and has been following their activities since.

The data presented in this paper show how Fanglao has succeeded in building a community of young people through dance and the importance of this for individuals in their efforts of becoming and being a dancer. Fanglao seeks to make real the idea that dance can be a livelihood and creates moments of involvement of (aspiring) Lao dancers to global artistic community. This can be considered a prefigurative practice. At the same time, for very few of the young people associated with Fanglao this involvement can be (near) exclusionary. They are simultaneously building their lives and careers in further ways.

Situating Fanglao

Fanglao was established in 2013, but to understand its position in the transnational Lao dance scene we need to go further back in time. Much linked to the socio-economic transitions unfolding in Laos throughout the 1990s and global developments that happened in parallel (especially the rise of the internet), the early 2000s marked the emergence of a new creative arts scene across urban Laos as is documented in Steve Arounsack's (Arounsack, 2018) 'Getting Lao'd': The rise of modern Lao music and films'.

The opening up of borders facilitated the import of musical equipment, VCDs and eased the travel of people, including artists, in and out of Laos. The rise of satellite television and subsequently the internet provided a new environment for Lao youth to connect with global forms of youth culture, including urban dance and popular music. The importance of all this is reflected in how Peun first got into dance:

'After I saw b-boying on (Thai) television, I practiced by myself. I started from headstand and head spin…I tried myself at home, until one day I met my brother's friend he told me 'oh we have something like this in our village, do you want to see', then I went to see. Peers were important because at that time learning from TV and internet was restricted 'I didn't know how to use youtube or the internet, each day I just spent my after-school time practicing dancing with friends'

Peun's story reflects that of other young men too. In contrast, among the young women dancers the school, in the form of extra-curricular dance activities and performances, played often an important role too which was then amplified through digital encounters with dance through television and the internet. The example of Peun also shows how new forms of media and individual practice in private places may be important starting points for getting involved in dance, these initial private and mediated encounters were at later points then solidified through actual social practice with peers.

Next to the virtual travel of styles and ideas the opening up of borders also facilitated the physical movement of (aspiring) artists – including from the Lao diaspora. For example, Tommy is a key actor in the Vientiane b-boying scene. He is born in France to Lao parents and moved back to Laos with his family at age 8. 'I started to like dancing since I was very young…since I was 3-4 years old. My father liked music, he had his audios and amplifier and he opens the music quite loud…We had tapes cassettes… of Thai songs, and I also listened to music in mainstream like Michael Jackson, that made me want to be like him. At that time I like dancing, singing and mimicking what I saw'… that changed after they had moved to Laos. Then he started 'Thai boxing' because his father had encouraged him to do so. In his young teenage years he also got into gaming and rarely danced. His interest in dance returned when

he was about 13-14 yrs old. Then, his younger sister started to dance through school in a class run by a French teacher. 'It was free but I didn't join the class as I was shy…and just watched'. His sister taught him dance at home, and by practicing at home and once he had developed more confidence in his dance he joined dance in school and also connected with people outside of school through dance.

These individual stories about entering dance and the emergence of informal peer groups also translated into more organized dance structures being set up. The association Lao Bang Fai is the case in point. Several of the key protagonist of Fanglao were previously Lao Bang Fai members or involved otherwise. The French-Laotian dancer and choreographer, Ole Khamchanla, played a key role of connection.

Ole Khamchanla is the founder and director of the France based dance company 'Kham'. He's Lao born, but left Laos with his sister and mother (father stayed behind). He's been living in France (Lyon) since 1980 and was raised there. In an interview with Daisuke Muto (2016), Ole explained that he got into dance because of Michael Jackson 'I imitated him obsessively. But, I came to want to learn more, and the most easily accessible was hiphop culture and street dance. I think I was 14 years old; there was someone who street danced in my neighborhood, and, since it was free, I started to study with him. It was Old School: breaking, locking, and popping…At first, we would gather around one teacher, but soon after we started to pursue and develop our techniques ourselves. There were French, Laotian, and also Arabic and African people; we had many foreigners in the neighborhood. Wherever we found a flat surface—whether it be at a community center, the back of a store, or a station—we would practice.'

Ole has been visiting Laos since 2006. Initially, primarily to study Lao traditional dance and subsequently also to work with Lao dancers through workshops facilitated by, for example, the Institut Francais in Vientiane, Laos. Around 2007, Ole spent a one-month artist-in-residence period at the Institut Français. As part of this activity he organised a number of break dance and contemporary dance classes. In an interview Ole recalled "The participants were mainly break dancers but it was for them to improve their techniques and also to expose them to ways of combining different genres; mixing hip-hop culture and Laotian traditional dance to create contemporary pieces, for example.' Several dancers who participated were Lao Bang Fai member then and now have key roles with Fang Lao.

Although the boundaries between Lao Bang Fai, Fang Lao and other dance groups are fluid at the level of individual dancers, structurally there are important differences. Lao Bang Fai is an association whereas Fang Lao is a private company. According to one of the founders of Lao Bang Fai, the status of 'association' means that Lao Bang Fai 'is recognised by the Lao government and works in partnership with the Lao government.' Similar to other associations in Laos, it has a centralised structure with sub-divisions at more local levels. One of the reason of registering as a company and not an association was for Fang Lao to keep some distance from government and to maintain a lean and flexible organisational structure. According to Ole, the organisational structure of a private company makes it easier to realise Fang Lao's objective of contributing to the development of the dance scene in Laos, and especially contemporary dance.

Prefigurative practice

Jeffrey and Dyson define 'prefigurative politics' as 'embodying in the present one's vision of the future' (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2016: 78). Recent manifestations of the idea of prefigurative politics they locate in relation to social movements, especially anarchist movements, yet they make a case that the concept also helps illuminating the everyday practices of youth 'social activists' in India whose actions they describe as both politically as well as ethically motivated (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2016: 86).

As already alluded to by Mimee in the opening quote, in Laos there isn't an established urban or contemporary dance scene. While there state dance troupes and there is traditional dance, for other forms of dance there is hardly an infrastructure in Laos let alone adult role models. Therefore, for young people who get exposed to these forms of creative expression and role models through digital sources or through events taking place in Laos, it is unclear how one can become a dancer and what this would entail. Moreover, parents may be supportive of their children taking an interest in dance as a hobby but typically become less supportive if they see this hobby becomes a serious interest and may start, in the eyes of parents, competing with other activities (such as studies). Additionally, girls and young women face the additional challenge that they are often not allowed to travel independently to dance classes or events if these take place in evening hours.

The notion of 'prefiguration' I use in this paper at the level of practice. In the absence of an established urban and contemporary dance scene, various dimensions of Fang Lao can be seen as amounting to making real in the present dance as a future possibility, among other things through:

- Creating earning opportunities through dance
- Internationalism
- Realising their own dance studio

According to Ole in an interview in 2016, 'The idea that you can actually make a living as a dancer is still something very new there. So, by demonstrating that it is possible to earn a living in this field, I am hoping the field will continue to develop. For example, being a professional dancer and choreographer myself, in France, I can make a living by working steadfastly. However, in Laos, you can only make a living as a dancer or choreographer for traditional dance or music as a member of the official art troupe. As a street dancer or contemporary dancer, you have no choice but to stay freelance.' These words were echoed by Noutnapha, one of the founders of Fang Lao: 'I want to demonstrate to dancers in Laos how to pursue dance, not as a hobby, but as a profession. As Olé mentioned earlier, it is very possible to earn a living as a professional dancer, so I would like to continue on that path.'

The generational resistance young (aspiring) dancers might meet in their efforts of becoming a dancers are explained by Lucky. He left university after just one year in order to fully dedicate himself to dance. Talking about this he said:

> Of course, they [his parents] were angry. Because at that time, dancing definitely could not be a stable career, no company want a dancer…I was afraid because they scold on me. They were not happy that I didn't do as they plan. I let them scold and wait until they calm and started to talk with them. I told them that I may graduate at the university, I may make money or waste money… I tried to give them some reasons. So, we had a deal that if I could not make dancing as a job with in 5 years I had to go back to school. (Lucky, 25 January 2020)

Fang Lao has offered salaried jobs to a very small number of dancers. Additionally, Fang Lao dancers (and external dancers) can work on a freelance basis as dance teachers for dance classes hosted at Fang Lao or at other premises (i.e. at schools). If young (aspiring) dancers can prove that dance can become a livelihood basis they will experience less resistance from their parents for investing time in dance. At present, Fanglao has four dancers as full time staff: Nout, Kaka, Moto and Mimee. These four get a monthly salary and for each production and additional activity they receive a bonus. Ole explains that paying them a monthly salary is important. This way they can show to their parents that they can live from dancing. Ole says that this really is very important, the salary constitutes evidence that these youth are right and that things are possible through dance that their parents wouldn't believe in.

Although earning money through dance was probably the strongest argument to convince parents that dance might hold a future, international recognition was key too. Several young dancers remarked that their parents didn't really understand their dance. However, when

their children were invited to perform abroad and the cost of the trip were covered by foreign sponsors parents may still not fully understand their children's passion for dance but would realise that there must be something worthwhile there. It is in part for this reason that Fang Lao has exposed its talented members to international dance trips. Equally important, it is by spending time out of Laos that young Lao dancers get exposed to new artistic influences and other dancers which is all key for their artistic development. It is for similar arguments that the annual Fang Mae Khong international dance festival is so important. It brings over international dancers who perform and host workshops for those interested. Over the course of the festival, Fang Lao's venue transforms in a vibrant creative hub around modern dance – something very hard to find elsewhere in Laos at any other point in the year. Again, also this festival makes real in the present a possible future dance may hold.

Having its own venue (Fanglao blackbox) is another key element in the prefigurative practice that the work of Fang Lao amounts to. The structure is built on land owned by the parents of a Fanglao dancer and fanglao has a ten year lease on the land, free of charge. The construction was largely financed through crowd funding. The studio has space for an audience of about 100 people and at the time of research in 2020 it was still under development. The idea was to build residential space too for artists to stay over.

Fanglao blackbox is not only key in the vision of artistic development, but it also helps navigate the Lao political landscape. Previously, the annual international dance festival hosted by Fanglao was a public event which required complex negotiations with Lao authorities especially because it involved foreign dancers. Now that they have their own private premises, Fanglao has for permission only to deal with village level authorities which makes organising things much easier (probably also helped by the political relations of the landowners).

Ultimately, having their own studio creates a place where young dancers can hang out on the basis of a shared passion for dance, whilst also constituting a social and artistic meeting ground with international dancers.

Frictions

On one of the first evenings (23 Nov) of the 2019 Fang Mae Khong international dance festival there is a reasonable audience yet few Laotians in the audience. This is surprising because all Fanglao students and dancers had free entry to all the performances. The reason for these absences differed. Younger dancers depend on their parents for transport or might simply not be allowed to attend evening hour events. For older dancers, other commitments might be the obstacle. Some dancers had to attend other dance activities (teach classes, participate in a battle) or had school or work commitments. Hence, facilitating prefigurative practice itself do not ensure these practices will actually take place.

Additionally, I was surprised to hear from Ole that some dancers left their salaried work for Fanglao: 'For example, Lucky has left Fanglao because he wanted to travel more which means he was less available for Fanglao. Now he works for Fanglao as a freelance teacher so he hasn't really left.' When talking about this with Lucky himself he explained:

' when I work with Fanglao I had a salary and worked full-time. The disadvantage was that I didn't have much time for myself, the responsibilities increased, sometimes I had to do work not related to dancing. In some event I had to work at the backstage, didn't even get to dance' (Lucky)

While Ole insisted that the work responsibilities of salaried staff for Fang Lao are always flexible and tailor made in order not to get into the way of the dancers' artistic development, individual dancers (such as Lucky here) may still see this differently.

The prefigurative practice of creating earning possibilities through dance for (aspiring) Lao dancers may stand in friction with notions they encounter when participating in dance communities oversees. For example, Lao dancers can often not be too picky about the commercial dance activities they get involved in whereas Lao dancers hear from international

dancers that the artistic and creative dimension should always be leading. Similarly, Lao dancers often teach dance classes in a genre different from their own (i.e. contemporary dancer teaching K-pop or hiphop). And when they find students interested in the same genre they might find out that their students are more interested in learning certain technical tricks rather than the actual genre and its political history.

Finally, as for any youth-based community there is always generational renewal. Younger members join, older members might leave because life takes them to new destinations and phases. For example, Nunu explained she had discontinued her participation in a major dance performance (Phu Ying) because she was preparing migrating abroad. When talking in 2019, she said she planned moving to Australia/Melbourne because she has relatives there and she will work with relatives. She said she has never been to Australia before but her husband has. He has just gone previously and is now back in Laos. They have a child together, a 12 months old boy. I then ask whether any of the other dancers are married. She says 'no', because 'when they marry they mostly stop dancing because they then have to work and look after children'. She is an exception because her husband also dances, he is a b-boy dancer. He knows people in Australia who also dance and Nunu also thinks that she might get into dancing in Australia too but will first work with relatives.

Conclusion

In the context of Laos, the dance company Fang Lao is unique. It introduces contemporary dance to the Lao artistic landscape whilst also facilitating various forms of urban dance. The Fang Lao studio and its various activities I have argued can be understood as a prefigurative practice. It makes real in the presence the idea that dance can be a viable creative future. This is achieved through having a physical place, through the internationalism Fanglao facilitates and the earning possibilities it realises. While there are certainly prefigurative politics underpinning these initiatives, in this paper I have emphasised the practices because this also allows bringing in the various frictions inherent in the practices facilitated by Fanglao.

References

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